Order Up

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/65032840.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	F/M
Fandoms:	Street Fighter, Street Fighter (Video Games)
Relationship:	Ed (Street Fighter)/Reader
Characters:	Ed (Street Fighter), Falke (Street Fighter)
Additional Tags:	1880s, Slow Burn, Alternate Universe - Western, Threats of Violence, Bounty Hunters, Manipulation, Alcohol, Guns, Smoking, Gun Violence, Plot, Cowboys & Cowgirls, Wild West AU, Minor Character Death, Gangs, Bandits & Outlaws, Saloons, Light Angst, Slow Romance, Cowboy!Ed, Cowgirl!Falke
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-04-26 Words: 14,813 Chapters: 5/?

Order Up

by OrangeDemons

Summary

Cowboy!Ed x Saloon Girl!Reader

“You never join ‘em?” Falke asked suddenly, quirking an eyebrow at Ed as the music changed to a slower tune, “Dance, I mean.”

He snorted. “I’d rather shoot my own foot.”

Falke smirked at that. “Figured as much.” She turned her gaze back to the dancers, “Don’t see how they keep at it for so long, every night.”

“Money,” Ed shrugged, leaning against the post, “Saloon girls gotta earn their fill. And the folks here are willing to pay for a pretty smile.”

Falke hummed at his response, "Yeah, I suppose so.”

Title Page

ORDER UP

A wild west story

By Orange-demons

Original Creator - edsboxingglove

This story has been in the works for a while, and I decided to post some chapters for my 24th Birthday. I'm still on the fence about this AU, so if people are interested, I'm totally down to keep working on it in the background. Long form fics are still pretty new to me so don't be too harsh in the comments. The reader is feminine and is referred to as she/her in this story. Sorry for my GN!Readers. But I wanted to write this ever since I read edsboxingglove cowboy AU on Tumblr. Also, don't expect consistent updates for this because I'm finding it harder and harder to write fics due to my school schedule.

Prologue

Chapter Summary

A child wandering in the endless fields of a snowstorm.

A wind howled across the open plains with a fury strong enough to strip bark from tree trunks and whip snow into swirling devils that blotted out the horizon. Clouds loomed overhead in dark, churning masses, spitting white flurries so thickly that the world blurred into a shapeless canvas of icy landscape. At a distance, this winter storm would have appeared as a raging curtain drawn tight across the land, but for a lone child stumbling through the drifts, it felt more like the anger of the heavens unleashed.

At no more than eight or nine years of age, you fought your way forward, each step a test of will against the winds that tore at your patched coat and your stiff fingers. You were out here long enough that you started to get disoriented, even your name might have slipped from your mind had someone asked you then. Your existence had shrunk to simple survival as your thoughts were buried beneath panic and cold. You didn't know the time of day, only that the sky remained pale in color as the snow remained relentless. The howling wind distorted all sense of direction, and you kept your head bowed, half-blinded by the endless spray of white. You could feel the creeping numbness clawing at your fingers and toes, an agony that threatened to become mercifully dull if it advanced to more lethal degrees of frostbite.

Faintly, you wondered if you should have remained where you'd been, the little burrow under a hollowed-out stump in the woods that barely offered more than a sliver of shelter, rather than pushing onward. But your mother's words to find your neighbors had guided you these past weeks, told you to keep going, that stillness meant death in a storm such as this. If no help found you and if you didn't attempt to escape that half-sunken ruin of a hole, you would simply freeze while cowering in the dirt. At least moving around gave you a chance of staying alive.

And so you trudged on, breath gasping through lips cracked and bleeding from the cold, a muffled whimper escaping each time the wind blasted you with renewed force. Your feet sank into the snow up to your calves, and your coat, an adult's old garment, was crudely cut down to child size and dragged from being soaked. Its hem was dark with muddy slush, and icicles formed wherever stray bits of moisture clung. Every now and then, you paused to brush stinging pain from your eyes, blinking back tears that threatened to freeze on your lashes. Over and over, you told yourself. Just a bit farther, just keep walking.

You had no illusions that warm havens dotted these plains in great abundance. What few structures existed in these parts were abandoned mining shacks, stables left behind by traveling ranchers, or perhaps the occasional half-collapsed wagon. Many had been gutted by people coming in and out of Calico, leaving precious few supplies for the next soul who stumbled through. But if you were to survive, you had to believe you would find something like a place to rest, or if luck was on your side, living people who might take you in, even if it was only temporarily.

But the storm never gave up. It still raged around you like a bear ready to claw you down. You tried to recall how you ended up in this predicament in the first place, but your memories were as scattered as the snow whipped through the air. It was a small shelter in the distance that you had left behind in haste after being separated from your parents, the dull pain in your stomach from hunger, and an argument with a faceless adult who told you there was no place for you there. Now that your parents are gone, vanished, and lost to you forever. You pressed on, half-dreaming that you might find a better life beyond the next rise.

Eventually, your legs began to fail. The cold sank deeper into your flesh, hollowing you out from within. Each step demanded more willpower than you could muster, and you found yourself stumbling, falling to your knees in the freezing drifts, only to claw your way upright with trembling arms. Your vision blurred further, a mix of white and black shadows at the edges of your vision. A dull terror bloomed in your mind, the primal realization that you might not survive this. And yet you pushed forward, refusing to give in.

Your foot caught on something, maybe an unseen rock or a hidden root beneath the snow, and you pitched forward with a startled cry. You tumbled face-first into a bank of powder, the snow burning your skin like acid with its cold. You struggled to rise, but it felt as though your limbs had turned into leaden weights. You managed to push yourself into a half-crouch, only to collapse onto one side, your breath coming in ragged sobs. The swirling snow soared overhead, indifferent to your cries.

You told yourself, in a voice more hallucination than thought, that you couldn't give up but your body had other plans. Your eyes fluttered, exhaustion mingling with the creeping numbness that threatened to devour you. The wind raged, but it felt more distant than before, as if a heavy curtain muffled its roar. Somewhere in the recesses of your mind, you knew that if you closed your eyes now, you might never open them again. You tried to move your fingers, to force some vestige of warmth back into them, yet they barely twitched under the sodden fabric of your gloves. Your lips parted, an attempt at a prayer or a plea for help that dissolved into the storm's unrelenting fury.

Then, in the midst of that chaos, you thought you heard something like an echo, perhaps, or the whisper of a voice. You struggled to lift your head, but your neck refused to obey. The wind battered your ears, so you could not make out words, only the idea that someone was shouting, perhaps cursing at the howling gusts. A faint sense of wonder flitted through you: had you already begun to dream, to cross that threshold between life and death? Or were real people near?

You tried to call out but only managed a dry rasp. Summoning your last shred of will, you forced a hoarse cough, hoping someone would hear. The snow pelted your cheeks, turning every inch of exposed skin raw. For several heartbeats, you heard nothing but the wind's shriek. Then, suddenly, a broad figure silhouette loomed through the whiteout. You blinked, uncertain if it was truly there or a trick of your fading consciousness. But then it moved closer, accompanied by the creak of leather and the shuffle of boots in the snow.

You saw a pair of gloved hands reach for you. You tried to focus, but your vision slipped in and out. The shape crouched, and you caught a fleeting glimpse of a weather-beaten face framed by gray stubble before your eyes rolled back. The last thing you remembered was the distant sensation of being lifted, the harsh blizzard wind replaced by the warmth of rough wool as someone draped a cloak or blanket over you. A man's hoarse tone was laced with surprise, and another voice that belonged to a woman said something to him in a rushed tone as she wiped the snow off your face with a gloved hand.

Then you sank into darkness.

Ed

Chapter Summary

A sneaking Cowboy named Ed.

The saloon was alive with the clamor of voices, the scrape of barstools against warped floorboards, and the ever-present twang of a fiddle that never quite stayed in tune. A warm haze hovered beneath the gas lamps while their glow illuminated a swirl of dust and smoke from hand-rolled cigarettes. The din flowed with each passing minute as laughter turned to curses, curses rose to scuffles, and then there was music and dancing all over again. To any fresh-eyed wanderer, it might've seemed like a ruckus. But for you, it was simply another Saturday night.

You made your rounds quietly, which was out of place in the storm of chaos around you. In a place where hoarse shouts and wild laughter reigned supreme, you managed to glide across the floor as if moving on a polished stage. Your skirt, which was modest but fetching enough to make wandering eyes linger, swished just below your knees. Under the lamplight, your features seemed etched with a beauty that most men noticed after a second look. That gentle reserve had saved you from many an ugly confrontation, but it had also given rise to more than a few rumors among the drunks and drifters who came and went. You were guarded, and not many could claim to know you well.

Which was exactly how you liked it.

In a corner of the saloon, a group in worn dusters sat hunched over a table scattered with cards and coins. A small, embossed emblem of an owl was visible here and there on a belt buckle, at the lapel of a vest, or on the brim of a hat. An insignia was enough to make the uninitiated keep their distance. They were an unnamed group, but if you saw the owl on a fella's gear, you typically knew better than to cross them. No one had pinned a fancy name on them yet, though the townsfolk recognized them quickly enough. With the chaos that always threatened to boil over, it helped to have people like that group, willing to snuff out trouble when lawmen were too slow or too few.

And trouble, you noted, found them just as often as they found it.

You caught a glimpse of Ed leaning back in his chair at that table. Hat low on his brow, arms crossed, the faintest curl of a scorn at his lips. Of all the folks wearing that owl logo, Ed was the one who had a reputation for being brash, rude, and mean, plain and simple. He was no giant by any measure, but he carried himself in a way that made men twice his size step aside. You had seen him here many times before, though you didn't care much for the way he watched the crowd. Almost like he was always waiting for an excuse to jump and crack his knuckles against someone's jaw. That was his brand of fun. And if you were being honest, his presence tended to bring more chaos than it prevented.

You didn't dwell on him long, though, mostly because you had your own business to attend to. Your job was to ensure the glasses stayed full and the customers stayed content enough not to break too many chairs. With a polite dip of your head, you passed a whiskey to an older regular at the bar, then passed toward the next table. You practiced this slow dance of weaving between rowdy

patrons, turning your shoulders just so, laying a brief hand on someone's shoulder if they blocked your path. You've never had to raise your voice, but people tended to listen.

"Evenin', boys," you greeted a pair of gamblers who'd been at it for hours with their eyes red from smoke, "Need another bottle?"

One nodded wearily as you placed the bottle on the table. Coins were deposited on the tray you balanced against your hip, and you moved on with a practice grin.

That was when you caught sight of Mr. Finch, or rather, heard him. Most folks in the saloon recognized the man's loud, nasally chatter from a mile away.

He was perched on the edge of a table at the far side of the room, holding forth to whoever had the patience to listen to his drunken boasts. He had a nasty habit of bragging about his winnings and an even nastier habit of losing them just as fast. Finch liked to believe he was a smooth-talker, but you knew better. His eyes were unfocused, like he'd been gulping back whiskey with the desperation of a man trying to outrun his own thoughts. Finch was trouble under normal circumstances. But now, as he drank deep into his cup, he was the kind of trouble that no one wanted to deal with.

With careful steps, you approached him. There was a moment of hesitation bellowing in your stomach, something that told you he'd been getting rowdier as the night wore on. But you were no stranger to men like Finch. You'd been in this line of work long enough to sense when a man had reached the tipping point between loud and dangerous. And you had your ways of dealing with them.

"Mr. Finch," you said, trying to keep your voice soft, "How about I fetch you some water? You've been drinking quite a bit tonight."

He turned bleary eyes on you, tipping his head back to take you in. He was a short, wiry man, but had the pride of someone twice his height. "Aww, come on, darlin'," he slurred, "Don't you think you're oversteppin'? I know how to handle my liquor."

"I'm sure you do, sir. All the same, water couldn't hurt." You nodded.

A hint of annoyance crossed his face. And you realised that look. It was when a man decided he didn't appreciate being told what he should or shouldn't do. You'd seen it a hundred times. Sometimes, they let it go. Sometimes, they doubled down. Finch, apparently, was the latter sort.

He smirked, leaning closer to you to brush his hand against your hip. The move was light, almost subtle, but it still caught you off guard. You immediately straightened as you pivoted to remove yourself from his reach. Wandering hands, you thought. You knew how to handle them, but that knowledge never smoothed out the initial jolt of anger and discomfort whenever it happened. And tonight, you were already tired.

"Mr. Finch," you began, voice still low. "I'm not here for that."

"Aww, come on," he drawled, sliding off his seat with more effort than dignity. He was taller than you by a few inches, but his posture was unsteady. "You're a saloon girl, ain't ya? S'posed to show a lonely man a good time."

You pressed your lips into a thin line as you felt heat flare behind your eyes. You were all too aware that if you raised a hand, if you let your anger rule you, it would cause a scene, one that Finch

would twist in front of everyone. So you simply looked him square in the eye and steeled your nerves.

“That’s not how it works,” you said. “If you want another drink, I’ll oblige. But I won’t be manhandled into doing something else for you.”

He barked out a laugh that turned a couple of heads from the nearby tables. You saw a few regulars watching from behind their cards, glancing around for a bouncer or a friend to intervene. And at the back table, the group with the owl insignia was beginning to stir. You didn’t glance in their direction, but you knew Ed had noticed. He was always watching for sparks of trouble, ready to fan or extinguish them at will.

Finch leaned in, his breath smelled of alcohol as it fanned across your face. “Don’t act all high and mighty,” he snarled, voice low enough that only you could hear. “I’ve seen the way men look at you, flickin’ your skirt around. Takin’ their money for those fancy dances. All you girls ever want is coin, don’t you?”

You felt the hot flush of warm anger in your cheeks. For years, you tried to find other forms of ways that kept you from shouting, one that let you meet his gaze without blinking. If you were someone else, they might have cowered under his touch, or another might have just slapped him. But you held your ground, determined not to let him push you over so easily.

“I suggest you walk away, Mr. Finch,” you muttered, “Because if you keep on like this, we’re gonna have a real problem.”

Finch scoffed as his fingers twitched at his side, and you prepared yourself, every nerve in your body coiling. You’d dealt with belligerent men before, and even if you weren't as strong as they were, you were fast. So if Finch tried something, you could dodge his arm in a heartbeat, maybe even throw him off balance so he’d make a fool of himself. But part of you dreaded it might escalate too far, and the last thing you wanted was a brawl in the saloon. Not when folks were already on edge.

And that was when you heard the sudden scrape of a wooden chair against the floor.

You didn’t need to look to know who it was.

Ed had risen, in a slow and deliberate manner, while the rest of his gang watched from their seats. There was a certain tension in the air, like the rumble before a thunderstorm, as heads turned to watch him cross the saloon. He didn’t bother to push through the crowd, most already parted when they saw the cowboy approaching them. When he emerged in Finch’s line of sight, he didn’t say a word. He only cocked his head, his gaze settling on Finch’s hand, still angled dangerously close to you.

“Evenin’, Finch,” Ed drawled, voice carrying in the sudden hush. “You seem a bit lost.”

Finch glared at Ed, but there was a brief shot of hesitation in his eyes. “What’s it to you, boy?” he snapped. “I’m havin’ a conversation here.”

Ed’s blank stare was hard. You mentioned before that he wasn't as big as some burly men, but there was something in the way how he held himself and how his deadpan look made him a threat. Slowly, he pushed the brim of his hat up with a single finger, revealing just enough of his face to let Finch see the irritation was really simmering in there.

“Seems to me,” Ed said slowly, “that your conversation ain’t entirely welcome. It’s best you leave the lady alone.”

You stood there, heart racing as you watched the two men lock eyes. On some level, you resented needing anyone’s interference because you’ve dealt with these situations before. But you still felt a faint wave of relief wash over you, since dealing with Finch alone would’ve drained the last of your patience. You mentally thanked Ed, though you’d never say it to his face.

Finch opened his mouth to hiss a retort, but wavered in his throat. He looked around, realizing eyes were on him. The bartender had gone still, the band up top had paused mid-song, and even the gamblers had frozen mid-hand to watch the commotion. Even Falke, from across the room, watched intently, her usually calm blue eyes sharp with warning.

“Hell,” Finch spat under his breath, “I paid for drinks and a little fun. Ain’t no harm in talkin’ to her.”

“Ain’t no harm in talkin’,” Ed agreed. “But your hands aren’t really talkin’ much now, are they?” He jerked his chin toward Finch’s wandering hand. “We’ll see how much you like it when someone puts their hands on you without permission.”

And in a flash, Ed stepped close with a quick motion, like slicing the air with a knife. He grabbed Finch’s wrist with a viselike grip, causing Finch to let out a yelp, squirming to yank his arm free, but Ed twisted just enough to send a sharp jolt of pain through Finch’s shoulder. It wasn’t enough to break anything, but it was certainly enough to get his attention.

You watched, wincing inwardly even as you knew that Finch had brought this upon himself. The saloon collectively tensed, ready to see whether they’d be needing the doc tonight. But Ed didn’t push it too far, he never did, not unless he had to. Keeping Finch’s arm locked in that uncomfortable angle, Ed leaned in, his voice low and threatening.

“You even think about laying a finger on them again,” he warned, “you’ll be limp as a wet rag for the rest of your life and that’s if I’m feelin’ generous.”

Finch’s eyes widened with terror, and as drunk though he was, he believed Ed’s threat. Slowly, Ed released his grip, shoving Finch back a step so he had to catch himself on the edge of the table. The man’s face was flushed, partly from pain, partly from rage, but also from humiliation. In the shocked silence, no one moved to defend him.

“Now,” Ed continued, voice loud enough for the entire saloon to hear, “I suggest you finish your drink quietly or get out. I’m tired of seeing your face around here.”

For a second, you expected Finch to do something reckless like throw a punch or reach for his gun. But getting a harsh dose of reality in the form of Ed must have doused any last spark of courage he had burling in his stomach. Finch grumbled something incoherent, snatched his hat off the table, and stumbled away toward the exit, rubbing his wrist against his chest like he was trying to wipe the other man off of him.

And then it was done, like lightning striking and receding in the space of a heartbeat.

Slowly, the saloon’s usual noise resumed. The band fixed their attire and started back up, a few chords drifting into the air. The gamblers returned to their card game, and some patrons turned their

attention to drinks or conversation. You let out a long exhale, soft and measured, before stepping to the side. Ed stood in the same spot, his own posture still rigid with leftover adrenaline.

“You all right?” he asked, turning his head just enough to look at you from the corner of his eye. His voice was gruff, almost an afterthought, as though concern wasn’t something he was used to expressing.

“I’m fine,” you replied briskly, ignoring the tremor of relief in your chest. “Didn’t need you to intervene, but…thanks.”

He huffed, crossing his arms. “Sure looked like you needed it from where I was sittin’.”

You shot him a sidelong look. “I know how to handle men like Finch.”

“Didn’t mean you didn’t deserve a break from it. Figured I’d help.” He shrugged, The words were plain enough, but there was an underlying layer of uneasiness or apprehension in his voice.

You weren’t sure, You’d never much liked Ed, especially the way he reveled in violence and strife. Yet in that moment, standing in the dusty swirl of the saloon, you found yourself appreciating him. You pressed your lips together, unsure whether to thank him again or to remind him you didn’t need saving. In the end, you said nothing at all. You only inclined your head, in an almost gracious gesture, and turned away, placing your tray carefully on the bar.

From across the room, Falke rose and approached Ed. Though she was typically the cool head of the group, there was a way she presented herself that made her as much of a threat as her companions. She glanced at you, then at Ed.

“You cause a scene everywhere you go,” she chided, but her tone was mild. “The owner might start putting it on your tab if you start too many fights.”

Ed let out a bitter laugh. “Wasn’t lookin’ for no trouble. Finch was only makin’ a fool of himself. You saw it.”

Falke rolled her eyes, letting her gaze fall on you for a moment, like she was studying you, “All right, enough, let’s settle,” she finally said, patting Ed’s arm. “We’ve got bigger things to worry about and I don't need you picking fights with every rufian who stumbles in through those doors.”

“It’s not picking a fight if it’s stopping one.” Ed’s tone was dismissive. He cast a brief glance in your direction, like he wanted to say something else. But then, he turned on his heel and headed back to the corner table with Falke following in his wake. One by one, the other members of that unnamed group sat down again, tension rolling off them in steady waves. And the night was far from over.

You felt the blood humming in your veins. The bartender, Mr.Rickshaw, a kind older man, sidled up beside you.

“You all right?” he asked in a hushed tone.

“I’m fine.” You picked up a rag to wipe the tray.

Mr. Rickshaw sighed, clearly relieved, “I despise boys like Finch, they give a town like Wellington a bad name whenever they kick up a ruckus…This ain’t the first time he’s done something like this,

but I sure hope it's his last." He leaned in, in a low voice, "And I've got my eye on you if he tries anything else."

You offered a polite smile toward him. You appreciated the gesture,really, you did. But part of you stiffened at the idea of being shielded all the time. You'd survived in that saloon for years, had handled countless men who thought they had the right to grope or grab you. You didn't need protection. Yet a part of you, the one currently vibrating from the near-altercation, was quietly glad.

Wiping a bead of sweat from your forehead, you straightened your shoulders and resumed your work. Some men beckoned from the far side of the bar, demanding more whiskey, and you obliged with a practiced smile. A small group requested a round of drinks at a table near the doo,; you carried out the order, carefully avoiding the splintered section of the floor that threatened to catch the hem of your skirt. All around you, the saloon's life thrummed and churned, the night forging onward without pause.

Occasionally, your eyes flicked toward Ed's table. He was leaning forward, talking in hushed tones to Falke and another friend from their gang. Even from a distance, you noticed the tightly coiled strain in his muscles wanting to let loose and the restless movement of his fingers drumming on the tabletop. Trouble, you thought again. He and his crowd always attracted it. Even as you recognized that he had helped you tonight, you couldn't forget how quickly the atmosphere had turned electric when he decided to intervene. Was it a kindness or simply his eagerness to fight? Perhaps both. You couldn't quite decide, and you weren't sure you wanted to.

The hours crawled, as they always did on nights like this, each moment blending seamlessly into the next until the lines of time blurred. The band played, the bartender poured, and you walked miles around the saloon floor. Now and then, you danced briefly with a patron who slipped an extra coin your way, always maintaining a respectful distance. You recognized half of them, remembered which men were polite and which might try to cross a line if they got too comfortable. Each dance ended with you gently disentangling yourself, gracefully pivoting away before anyone got any bold ideas. The flicker in their eyes let you know they appreciated your elegance, even if it was a stark contrast to the chaos around them.

Eventually, the clock on the wall told you it was well past midnight. Your feet ached, your back twinged, and your patience was wearing thin. Finch was long gone, presumably nursing a sore wrist and a bruised ego somewhere. The saloon was beginning to thin out, some men staggering home, others nodding off in corners with hats pulled low. Cards continued to slap down on scratched tables, coins rattling as they changed hands. Outside, the moon hung high, silvering the dust that gusted in under the door whenever it opened.

You were clearing glasses off a vacant table when a slow drawl cut through the din behind you.

"You planning on cleaning all night?"

You glanced over your shoulder.

Ed. He was standing there, arms folded. He wasn't smirking. He looked…well, he looked tired. The brash glint in his eyes was muted, replaced by curiosity, maybe. Or something akin to it.

"Just finishing up," you replied. "Why?"

He shrugged. "Nothin'. Just seemed like you could use a rest."

In the beat of silence, you met his gaze, measuring the sincerity in his words. Then you turned back to the table, stacking the empty glasses carefully on your tray. “I can’t rest ‘til I’ve done my job, that’s why they pay me.”

He grunted. “Yeah, well, I also have a job, but it don’t mean I can’t take a breather when I need one.”

You said nothing, carrying the tray over to the bar and setting it down. Mr. Rickshaw offered you a nod, letting you know he’d handle the washing. You turned around to find Ed still watching you. It wasn’t the leering stare of a drunk or the suspicious glare of a man looking for a fight. It was… almost concerned. What a weird feeling.

“You planning on making me thank you again?” you asked, arching a brow.

He barked out a dry, humorless laugh. “I ain’t the kind to expect thanks, you know that.”

You did know it. You’d heard stories about Ed how he’d roamed from one territory to another, always ready to raise hell, but never one to gloat over a good deed. If anything, he preferred the trouble to the gratitude.

“Good,” you said quietly. “Because I don’t owe you that.”

He tilted his head, studying you. “You ever lighten up?”

You blinked. That was a question no one had asked you, at least not so bluntly. Most men didn’t care to see past your soft-spoken demeanor. They took your presence for granted with a pretty fixture in the saloon, like the polished rail of the bar or the well-worn piano in the corner.

“Why so curious?” you returned, sidestepping a tipsy man who nearly crashed into you.

He shrugged again, resting a hand on his belt. He glanced over at Falke, who was lingering near the door, clearly waiting for him. Then he looked back at you. “We come in here. We see you. You see us. I just figured you know more about us than we do about you.”

“Maybe I do,” you said, “maybe I don’t.”

He scooffed, a small, knowing sound. “What I do know is you can handle yourself. No question about that. But I also know men like Finch don’t take a hint too well.” He paused, his voice dropping lower. “If he comes back, or if someone like him bothers you, you let me or Falke know. You ain’t gotta deal with shit like that alone.”

Your turn to stare at Ed. He was still the same brash man who brought trouble to your doorstep every other weekend when he sauntered in with that owl emblazoned on his gear. But perhaps there was a kernel of good in him, or at least a sense of duty that extended beyond the rowdy scuffles he initiated. Reluctantly, you acknowledged that maybe, just maybe, having him and his gang around wasn’t all bad.

“I appreciate the offer,” you replied quietly, “I’ll keep it in mind.”

Then, like he’d had enough of that conversation, He nodded once, in a rough goodbye and moved off to join Falke. You watched him go, a faint crease between your brows. You could see Falke say something to him under her breath, casting a curious glance your way before the pair slipped out

into the night. The swinging doors of the saloon flapped shut behind them, and the swirling dust settled again.

Alone in the hush that followed their departure, you took a moment to breathe. The night was nearly over. Just another hour or two, and the bartender would close up, leaving you free to slip upstairs to your room, where you'd peel off your corset and let your aching feet rest. As you scanned the saloon one last time for any stragglers needing a top-off or a guiding hand toward the door, your mind drifted to the encounter with Finch.

You could still feel the ghost of his hand at your waist, the unpleasant tingle it left behind. But that memory was overshadowed by the sight of Ed stepping in, quick, furious, and unapologetic. You let out a tired sigh. Maybe the gang didn't mean to be the trouble they were. Maybe, in their own way, they actually kept the real problems in check. As for Ed, you still weren't particularly fond of him, to you, he was like a fuse ready to blow at the slightest spark. But perhaps now you understood there was another side to that coin. He had his reasons, and tonight, those reasons had led him to help you.

A saloon girl like you didn't often rely on anyone else, especially not a man. But if the day came when Finch, or someone like him, showed up again with a grudge in his eyes and whiskey on his breath, it wouldn't hurt to have Ed's warning echo in your mind.

You closed your eyes, just for a moment, letting the music of the saloon wash over you as the band played its last melody and drunken conversation seeped into the air. Another typical night in a place where chaos and calm lived side by side. And though you stood in the midst of it with your usual poise, something had shifted ever so slightly.

Tomorrow, the world would go on as always. Ed and the rest of the gang might roll back into town or ride off somewhere else, Mr. Finch might nurse his ego, or he might slink back to stir up more trouble, though you suspected he'd think twice next time. And you would still be here, collecting your coins, dancing with lonely patrons, and playing the role of the quiet saloon girl.

Poker

Chapter Summary

Poker games and mind games go hand in hand.

It was early evening in the saloon, that sweet spot of time before the real drunken havoc set in, and the lamps overhead had just been lit. Their glow kissed the smoky air, making the haze wisp around patrons playing poker or sipping whiskey. You moved through the tables, sliding a tray of drinks onto a table for a group of miners. You kept your smile polite and unobtrusive, the corners of your mouth lifting just enough to be friendly. They nodded in thanks, and you drifted away, skirts rustling like whispers in the hush that had momentarily fallen over the room.

At one of the far tables, men were clapping each other on the back, grinning over small piles of coins. It wasn't a high-stakes crowd tonight, just a handful of dusty travelers who'd been run off their feet working in the fields outside of town, or men trying their luck after selling wares at the weekly market. No big fish in the room yet, save for the occasional gambler who drifted in from out of state.

But trouble never cared about big or small. With the band in the corner playing lazily, the bartender wiping glasses at the counter, and the old piano occasionally chiming in with a cheerful chord, you could still sense that at any moment, a raised voice might lead to fists, and fists might lead to bullets. It happened that way sometimes. Fast and sudden as a thunderclap.

That was why Ed and his gang frequented the place, they were that rowdy yet oddly effective group of men and women who kept the real chaos at bay when the lawman was off somewhere else. They didn't go by a fancy moniker, only by the owl embossed on their garments.

But tonight, only Ed and Falke were parked at a table by a big window, shadows cast long across the plank floor. They weren't gambling. Ed looked bored, tipping his chair back on two legs while Falke quietly read some worn letter. Occasionally, he'd try to poke at Falke or flick the brim of her hat, just to irk her, making her slap his hands away whenever he pushed it enough.

Regardless of how you felt about them, one thing remained true, the saloon was safer with them around than without them. So you had to accept that with a private sigh, going about your work as you had for years, serving drinks, sharing a brief dance with a lonely patron, or offering a smile for a man who'd lost more than his fair share at cards.

That was when Mr. Milton, a newcomer to the scene, singled you out.

He was some jovial looking fellow, a bit soft around the middle, with a tan vest that strained at the buttons. He'd been a decent tipper so far, which automatically put him on your good side. But you hadn't spent much time near him until he beckoned you with a theatrical wave of his hand. You approached with the same measured grace you always used, ignoring the mild throbbing in your feet. At this point in the evening, you'd done a dozen laps around the saloon.

“You called, Mr. Milton?” you asked, setting the empty tray flat against your hip.

He gave you a wide, toothy grin. “I did, missy. I sure did. See, I got a problem.” He gestured to the poker table, where a few seats were still open. “I’m fixin’ to get in on the next hand. But my poker skills are…lackin’, to put it kindly.” He chuckled, scratching the underside of his chin. “I heard tell you’re real quick-witted, and you know your way ‘round the deck. Think you could lend a fella a hand? I ain’t talkin’ about just standin’ behind me, either.”

Your brows lifted in polite query. “What do you mean?”

He patted his knee. “Pull up a seat. On me. That way you can see my hand and whisper advice. Call it good luck if you please.”

Your first reaction was caution. A request like that could easily turn unsavory. But Milton wasn’t leering, he was just flamboyant in an almost comical way, his eyes bright with excitement rather than malice. He looked more like a man who thought of himself as a big-shot gambler but was too honest to be any good at lying. If he meant for his invitation to be suggestive, he certainly wasn’t letting on. Besides, you’d dealt with far worse forms of “friendly” contact over the years.

Still, you gave him a small, measured smile. “You trust me enough to help you wager your money?”

Milton’s grin deepened. “I do. Maybe it’s foolish, but the way you carry yourself? You got an air ‘bout you, Miss. I like that. Plus, if I’m gonna lose, I might as well have a pretty lady on my knee.” He gave an easy laugh that told you he didn’t think too hard on the matter.

You took a moment to consider it. You weren’t in the habit of sitting on men’s laps, and you rarely even sat when invited to a table. But the saloon was quiet tonight, the crowd mostly mild. And Milton, from what you could tell, wasn’t a threat. A bit loud and carefree, but not menacing. More importantly, the barkeep had no issue with you engaging in a bit of light entertainment as long as you weren’t ignoring your duties. Perhaps this could be fun in its own strange way.

“All right,” you relented, “But if you lose, don’t go blaming me for it.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

You set your tray down, adjusted your skirts carefully, and slipped into the chair Mr. Milton had pulled aside for you. Actually, it wasn’t exactly a separate seat like he’d angled his chair out so there was room on the side of it for you. And instead, he patted his knee where you perched yourself gently, mindful of your skirt’s modest length. You were no stranger to closeness, but you disliked giving strangers reason to grope. Milton was all polite excitement, though, his hands rested on the tabletop to show he had no other motives.

All across the saloon, you could hear some whispers of curiosity spread with some watching with wide eyes or amused looks. A few women who worked alongside you exchanged knowing glances, they’d seen plenty of men make requests like these, though rarely with this playful twist.

The poker players at the table finished their current hand. Coins clattered as they squared up bets and dealt out winnings to the man with the best flush. Then they turned to Mr. Milton, who was grinning like he’d already won.

“You buyin’ in?” asked a man in a battered top hat, who served as a sort of informal dealer.

Mr. Milton dug into his vest pocket for a handful of coins and a few bills, stacking them neatly in front of him. “Reckon I’ll get my chance now.”

The dealer gathered the deck, shuffled with practiced dexterity, and began dealing. You felt the eyes of the others around the table flit to you and then away again, uncertain whether to be amused by the sight of you perched on Milton’s lap. You calmly watched the cards land in front of them. You had always been observant, reading the tension in the room, like the flicker of a brow or a slight downturn of the mouth when someone disliked their hand. It was second nature to you after years of dealing with gamblers, drifters, and con men.

Mr. Milton lifted his cards and angled them so you could see. He had a pair of nines, not the worst start. Your lips curved in a subtle, fleeting smile. Leaning close, you whispered quietly enough so only Milton could hear “Stay in, but don’t raise yet.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He nodded like a bobblehead.

The other players each called or folded. Milton matched their bets with an eager flourish. He flashed you a grin, and you felt a slight jostle as he adjusted his posture, trying to settle you more comfortably on his lap. He was respectful about it, at least, not letting his hands roam. Still, you kept a small measure of apprehension, ready to shift away if he crossed a line.

The game continued, Hand after hand, you murmured suggestions in Milton’s ear while he happily threw his coins in. The man was giddy, like a child at a carnival game. You were quick to note that the table’s competition wasn’t fierce tonight. Mostly, these men were passing time. There were no cunning high-stakes sharks laying traps. If Milton played with caution, he could probably pocket a small win.

And yet, you sensed something. Even as you guided him, you found your mind drifting. This was the perfect opportunity, if you were so inclined, to manipulate the flow of coins however you pleased. You could bolster Milton into winning big or gently steer him to lose. You had no personal vendetta against him, but you knew how the saloon’s economy worked. A man who walked away with too much money might attract bigger trouble. Or maybe you just didn’t like the idea of him prancing around, flush with cash, bragging about his saloon girl-lap-lucky-charm. Some men grew insufferable after a few good hands. And you’d noticed Ed out of the corner of your eye. You didn’t need the gang's brand of chaos tonight. Then again, if Milton made a showy fuss about winning, that alone might bring Ed over, itching for conflict.

Decision, decision. In your quiet way, you tested it out: on one particular hand, Milton drew a decent set of cards. You suggested that he should fold prematurely, saving him from a loss. The next hand, he had the potential for a straight, but you instructed him to bet low. Another hand, he had a terrible start, and you coaxed him into calling anyway, which ironically, by a twist of fate, earned him a small pot when everyone else folded. Milton was hooting with delight.

Your lips pressed together in a pensive line as you found yourself…playing a game. Not just poker, but a game of controlling the pace of Mr. Milton’s fortune. You didn’t want him to come out with a big haul. You didn’t need him so humiliated that he might blame you. So you kept it balanced. Win a bit, lose a bit, until coins were shifting subtly from one man’s hands to another.

Across the saloon, a few more stragglers wandered in, glancing at the lively table. Some sidled up with drinks, curious about the sight of you perched on Milton’s lap while the portly man laughed and hollered with every small success.

And so it went, a strange dance of fortune. Mr. Milton never realized how carefully you guided him. To him, it felt like a genuine run of decent luck. You kept your voice low and steady, never letting the other players overhear your advice. After an hour, he was slightly up. Just enough that the table teased him, joking that his ‘lap-lady’ must be a real good-luck charm.

Pleased, Milton decided to push his luck. He proposed a final game, throwing in what remained of his coin, a bold move from a man who was no card shark. You felt him shift beneath you, excitement and whiskey fueling his confidence. He glanced at you with glazed eyes.

“All in,” he declared, putting everything on the line. “One more for the road.”

You discreetly checked his cards. They weren’t terrible: a high pair, maybe workable if the turn of the next card blessed him. But the man across from Milton, the fellow wearing the battered top hat, had a smirk that betrayed something good in his hand. You could sense it. You also knew that if Milton lost everything at once, it might humble him enough to keep him from going around bragging too loudly. A small loss was sometimes the best medicine for a gambler who was too easily inflated by success.

You decided. With a nearly imperceptible tap of your fingers on Milton’s forearm, you encouraged him to call. He did so with gusto, piling up his remaining coins in front of him, confident that with you at his side, there was no way he’d lose big.

The dealer flipped the next cards onto the table. A tense quiet settled. You read the suits and values in a single glance, mentally calculating the potential outcomes. Milton had a pair plus a possible flush, but the man in the top hat was practically leaning forward with predatory glee.

You leaned in, lips near Milton’s ear. “Just relax,” you whispered, neither giving him false hope nor the truth.

The final card was revealed. Milton’s face split into a broad grin again, he’d improved to two pair. A decent hand, all things considered. He turned to you expectantly, like he wanted to see if you were about to beam with triumph. But you simply gave him a small nod with an unreadable expression.

They all laid down their cards. Top Hat revealed his straight, just strong enough to trump two pair and Milton’s face fell. It took him a moment to process that all his coins, that last big bet, were gone in a single swoop. The rest of the table chuckled, some sympathetically, others more smugly. Top Hat reached out and pulled the winnings toward his side of the table.

“Well,” Milton said, clearing his throat. “That’s that, then. Guess the lady’s luck ran out, huh?”

You slipped gently off his lap, brushing your skirt. “Seems so,” you hummed.

He pushed his chair back from the table, rummaging in his vest pocket to see if he had enough coin for another round, but it was as empty as could be. A flush crept over his cheeks. He looked at you with a rueful grin. “You did what you could,” he said, sounding almost apologetic, as if disappointed for your sake. “I appreciate you humorin’ me, Miss. Was fun while it lasted.”

You inclined your head, “It was. I’m sorry for your loss, Mr. Milton.”

He waved off your concern. “I’ll live. Just gotta do an extra day’s work in the fields, is all.”

It wasn't until the table broke up and the men began scattering that you felt a different kind of stare on you. You turned subtly to find Ed leaning against the bar, one boot crossed over the other, arms folded across his chest. He was regarding you with narrowed eyes, as though he'd seen all your little signals. You probably did since the faint shift of luck in Milton's earlier hand that seemed odd, folds that were unexpectedly timely, culminating in that final, crushing loss.

Some nights, Ed seemed more preoccupied with doing other things rather than watching a saloon girl sit in someone's lap. But tonight, he seemed more to have some curiosity that had him studying you from afar. You retrieved your tray, brushed off the imaginary dust, and headed toward the bar. The rest of the patrons had more or less returned to their own business, chatting and laughing over some cards. Mr. Milton was off to the side, patting his pockets, no doubt debating whether he could afford a drink to drown his sorrows.

Ed's voice was low but loud enough to reach you before you made it all the way to him, "You throw that game on purpose?"

You raised a brow as you came up alongside him, setting your tray on the bar. "You watching me that closely?"

"I'm watching everyone that closely," he drawled, "Saw you steer his luck around. And you're pretty good at it, better than I gave you credit for."

"I'm good at a lot of things you wouldn't guess." You offered a quiet laugh

He turned slightly, enough that the overhead lamp threw part of his face into shadow. A faint smirk tugged one corner of his mouth. "Why'd you do it? Could've let him win. He was an easy mark for some big pot if you played it right."

You lifted a shoulder, running your palm over the wood grain of the bar. "Mr. Milton's a sweet man, but sweet men get cocky fast when they think they've hit the jackpot. He would've told everyone I was his lucky charm. Word would spread. More men would ask for me to sit on their laps, day in and day out, expecting me to fix their luck. I don't need that." Your voice remained gentle, but a knowing edge underscored your words. "Better to let him lose in the end, even if it stings."

"So you took away his bragging rights." He mused.

"He'll recover," you said simply. "He's not the type to hold a grudge and I made sure he won a little at first so he could enjoy the thrill."

He nodded slowly, as if he respected your logic. "You handle people like it's second nature."

"I've had *Experience* ."

You both fell silent for a moment, the noise of the saloon rushing back in around you. From the corner, Falke glanced at you with mild curiosity but decided not to intervene. She had an uncanny ability to sense when Ed was having some sort of civil exchange and left him to it.

"You must've known I'd spot it," Ed said, not quite confrontational, more like stating a fact. "I've cheated and run enough cons to see a rigged game from across the room."

“You might have,” you replied. “But I wasn’t doing it to impress you. I did it for my own selfish reasons.”

He huffed a laugh. “Right, well, guess I can’t blame you. I might’ve done the same if I were in your place.”

You said nothing, letting his words hang in the air. You weren’t entirely sure what to make of Ed’s subdued mood. He had a reputation for keeping to himself and hardly approaching people unless he absolutely had to. But tonight, he seemed content to observe.

“How’s Milton taking it?” Ed asked, nodding toward the other side of the saloon, where the man in question was scrounging up enough coin for a final drink.

“He’ll grumble for a day or two,” you replied, “but he’ll manage. Most men do.”

Ed tapped his knuckles against the bar, mouth curving into a smirk. “You’re more dangerous than I give you credit for.”

You locked eyes with him, refusing to be cowed by his challenging stare. “I could say the same, Ed.”

The air between you crackled with a tension that wasn’t quite hostile. More like two people who understood the shifting rules of a place like this, each reading the other’s next move. You wondered briefly if he’d tease you or mock you, or if he’d shrug it off. With Ed, one never knew.

He eventually pushed off the bar’s edge, turning away as though the conversation had run its course. “So long as you’re not taking advantage of us, you can hustle all you want,” he said under his breath. “Though if I ever play with you, best believe I’ll keep my eyes open.”

“I would expect nothing less.” You almost laughed.

“Right.” He took a few steps away, then paused, glancing back at you with a more serious look. “You watch yourself, though. Not every man’s as easygoing as that fool. You hustle the wrong fella, you might end up with more than a lost game on your hands.”

Your lips parted, but no words came. You weren’t used to concern from Ed. Usually, you only saw rowdiness in him. Perhaps this was as close as he got to expressing worry. You dipped your head slightly in acknowledgment. “I know.”

He nodded once, curtly, and made his way back to Falke. Then, as if they had business elsewhere, the two of them left, boot heels echoing on the wood. The saloon door swung shut behind them.

You exhaled a breath you hadn’t realized you were holding. The hush of their departure lingered a moment, then dissolved back into the typical noise. Men started up the piano again, someone cranked the volume on the battered fiddle, and the everyday chatter resumed. All the while, you went back to work. Sometimes, you felt a twinge of guilt about your hustle, but you reminded yourself that saloon life was not a place for absolute honesty. It was a dance of survival, for you as much as it was for the gamblers. And if you could shape an outcome that kept the peace, well, that was part of your skill too.

Mr. Milton eventually approached you once more, hat in hand, face a touch pink from the liquor he’d just tossed back. “Miss, I do hope you’ll allow me to buy you a drink sometime,” he said, his

voice thick with both disappointment and lingering warmth. “Even if I lost, I had a grand time with you.”

You smiled at him. “I appreciate that, Mr. Milton. Perhaps another night. You save your coins for now.”

He laughed ruefully. “Right, I suppose I oughta earn some first.” With a small tip of his hat, he bade you farewell and wove his way out into the dusty street, still shaking his head at how close he’d been to winning big, or so he thought.

Alone for a brief moment, you let your shoulders slump. Your feet were sore, and the evening had stretched on longer than expected. You motioned to the bartender that you’d take a short break. With a weary sigh, you slipped into a quieter corner of the saloon where a few chairs were empty. You settled down, resting your elbows on the small wooden table, just letting the bustle pass you by. A swirl of smoke drifted from a nearby patron’s cigar, and the piano tinkled merrily at the other side of the room.

You thought of Ed’s words. That warning. You also thought of the subtle grin he’d given you, whether it was from admiration or annoyance. Despite your differences and your general dislike of his ways, you had a strange mutual understanding. You both knew how to read a room, how to size up a situation, and decide whether to strike or yield.

In this saloon, a thousand mini dramas played out every night, ranging from alliances formed and broken to men swaggering in with full pockets and stumbling out with empty ones. You were part of that tapestry, weaving in and out with your drinks and a pretty face. Ed was too, in his own way. And men like Mr. Milton came and went, leaving traces of laughter andfrustration behind.

Eventually, you stood from your brief rest. Work wasn’t over. There were still tables that needed wiping, and new patrons might wander in at any minute. So you dusted off your skirt, gathered up your tray, and slipped back into your well-practiced routine. You didn’t mention Milton’s lap again or the rigged outcome of the game. If someone asked, you’d shrug with a faint smile. And if Ed ever brought it up, you would return that cool, steady stare of his and let him know you had your reasons. You always did.

The night pressed on toward closing. Outside, the wind kicked up dust, rattling the shutters. Inside, the gas lamps cast warm circles of light on the worn wooden floor. You served a last round to the handful of patrons who remained, men with sagging eyelids and drooping posture. The hush of late-night settlement fell over the saloon. Cards lay scattered, coins rattled in empty pockets, and the bartender prepared to douse the lamps one by one.

In the corner, you took a final moment to yourself, pressing your palm to the small of your back where tension knotted from hours of moving around. You thought about the coins that had exchanged hands that evening, about the fortunes and misfortunes that had passed by in the swirl of cigar smoke and whiskey fumes. And you thought about the small secret that you’d deliberately led Mr. Milton to a gracious defeat. No one but Ed seemed to know, and he wasn’t the type to go announcing it to the world. Let him keep that knowledge. Let it simmer. Maybe it would give you one more thread of understanding, one more reason not to see each other as pure opposites in a place that thrived on extremes.

Then, with your usual quiet composure, you collected your tips, hung your apron, and prepared for the short walk upstairs to your small room above the saloon. You could still feel the ghost of Milton’s knee beneath you, the excitement in his voice, the hush of the table’s anticipation. You felt

a hint of satisfaction in your chest. Another night well-managed, you thought. Another bit of chaos tamed.

Nova

Chapter Summary

A beautiful chestnut horse named Nova.

A hot wind blows through the alley behind the saloon, stirring the dust in lazy curls that dance along the clapboard walls. Late afternoon sunlight bathed everything in a golden hue as you stepped out into its warmth with a small basket tucked under your arm. It's filled with apples, some peaches, and a few pears that are slightly bruised or just not quite pretty enough to serve to customers. Mr. Rickshaw, having no use for them, was more than happy to let you have them for feed.

You walked past a few men smoking near the back door and they gave you nods of acknowledgment as you moved by. The path behind the saloon leads to a small, worn stable. The building itself once was just a shed for travelers' horses, but over the years, it's been patched up into something more functional with stalls and troughs in each corner, with a paddock that stretches a short distance behind it. The scent of hay and warm animal hyde blankets the air in a familiar, almost comforting way.

You discovered long ago that the stables offer a bit of quiet refuge from the clamor inside the saloon. When too much commotion sets your nerves on edge, you sometimes wander out here under the pretense of bringing scraps of fruit. You find solace among these steady, patient creatures that never ask prying questions. They only nudge at you for treats or a soft pat.

Stepping beneath the stable's overhang, you blink as your eyes adjust to the interior's dimness. The roll of thunder in the distance suggests a storm is brewing, but for now, the light of day still fights its way through the cracks and gaps in the aged wooden boards. Dust motes drift in the sunbeams like shimmering ghosts.

You stick your head around the first stall door, greeting an old bay mare named Trigger. The horse angles her ears forward at your arrival, tail swishing at a fly. You smile gently and reach into your basket for a bruised apple half.

"There you go," you mumbled, holding it flat on your palm. Trigger takes it with a soft slurp, lips lapping over your hand. She crunches it happily as you run your palm along her velvety nose, just careful enough not to startle her. You always move carefully around them, much the same as you are in the saloon, but more at ease here where there are no leering eyes or rowdy drunks to contend with.

You continue down the row, greeting each horse you know. The fruit quickly disappears, devoured by grateful muzzles. Many of the owners who stable their horses behind the saloon pay a minimal boarding fee. Some traveling gamblers who linger for a week, others who've set up a more permanent arrangement if they work in or around town. There are even a few local ranchers who use these stalls when the weather turns sour. Over the years, you've learned most of their names. You're not always sure which horse belongs to whom, but you like them just the same.

Eventually, you came upon a stall near the back. The occupant stands partly in shadow, ears alert, head raised. It's a chestnut horse with a gleaming coat, well-muscled shoulders, and a noble carriage that suggests spirited blood. At first, you thought this horse might be new, you didn't recall seeing such a rich color in the stable before. Letting out a soft coo of greeting, you lean carefully over the door. You note that the horse's mane is braided in a simple pattern, and the tack hangs on a peg outside the stall. A nameplate on the wood reads 'Nova'.

"Nova," you read with a small smile, rolling a piece of soft pear in your hand. "Who do you belong to, I wonder?"

Nova flicks an ear at the sound of your voice. She gives a small toss of her head, stepping closer to sniff at the offered fruit. You see that her dark eyes look at you with curiosity and despite a proud stance, she seems gentle enough. You offer the pear, palm open and unthreatening, same as the other horses before her. The horse blows a warm breath against your skin and accepts it, chewing slowly.

"You're a friendly one," you say, charmed by the mare's gentle manner. "Well, I suppose that's a matter of perspective, hm? You look like you could be quite the handful if you wanted."

In truth, the horse is well maintained like how its coat is brushed to a shine and hooves recently cleaned and trimmed. Whoever owned Nova took pride in her condition. You found yourself humming softly, a tuneless lullaby that you sometimes sang under your breath when the saloon is just too loud. You reached up, gingerly rubbing the star-shaped mark on Nova's forehead and the mare flicked her tail, leaning into the soft pressure.

You wondered who the owner might be. Is it one of the out-of-towners, or perhaps a local rancher? Something about the horse's tack, with its subtle owl emblem stamped into the leather, teases at your mind. You've seen that owl logo all over town on belt buckles, on the brim of hats, pinned to jackets. The Owl Gang.

You don't linger on that thought too long. You've learned not to judge animals by their owners' reputations. If a horse is kind, that's all that matters to you. Still, you made a mental note that Nova probably belongs to someone from that group. Perhaps Falke? She's known to have a calm but watchful streak that would suit a steady horse. Or maybe one of the other riders who seemed more level-headed than Ed.

Surely it wouldn't be his horse, you think. The creature seems too docile, too nice. Besides, you dislike thinking about Ed more than you have to. You can't say precisely what makes you so wary of him, it's probably a mixture of his constant readiness for violence and the way that curls his lip whenever he speaks. Though he's stepped in a time or two when things got out of hand in the saloon, he never does it quietly or with poise. He does it with rough words and rougher fists. You appreciate the safety net that his gang provides, but Ed? Well, that's another story.

With a sigh, you let Nova finish the pear before rummaging for another fruit. You lightly scratch behind the horse's ears, watching her eyes half-lid in contentment. As you lean closer, the pleasant, grainy scent of horse wraps around you. There's something about horses that sets you at ease, more so than the drunken ramblings of lonely men inside the saloon.

A crack of thunder rumbles outside, and you feel the air shift, turning suddenly cooler. You glance back at the wide stable doors, seeing the dust picking up. A storm will break soon, you guess. Already, a breeze flickers through the stable, rattling the lantern that hangs near the far wall.

“Guess we might be in for a big one,” you said, looking back at Nova, “Better you tucked in safe in here than out there.”

You hand off the apple. Nova takes it gently, and you feel a burst of fondness for the sweet-tempered mare. She reminded you of a horse you rode as a child, back when you still lived miles away on your family’s farm, way before life threw you into circumstances that led you to working at a saloon. It feels like a lifetime ago.

Lost in your thoughts, you don’t notice the footsteps creeping until they’re nearly upon you. You blink, raising your head to see a figure standing in the stable’s open entryway, partially silhouetted by the setting sun and gathering storm clouds. Your heart gives a small jolt of surprise, It’s Ed.

You recognize the cut of his duster, the tilt of the hat, and most of all, that aura of pricklyness that surrounded him. He stood there for a moment, eyes flicking over the rows of stalls until they landed on you and the chestnut mare. A faint glare, or perhaps just his usual glare, crossed his features.

“Figures,” he grumbled, “I come out here for some peace, and what do I find?”

You shift so you’re no longer leaning into the stall. You draw yourself up, not contentious but certainly not cowardly. “I’m not stopping you from your peace, Ed. You’re free to carry on elsewhere.”

He snorted, stepping forward in that slow, controlled way he had, like something was brewing under his skin. The boots he wears are dusty, spurs jingling faintly. And on his belt buckle, a owl insignia glinted sparkly enough for you to see.

“Nova’s in here,” he says simply, nodding toward the stall. “And I saw you messing with her.”

Your eyes widened, “Nova belongs to you?”

His narrowed, annoyed by your surprise. “Yeah, she does. That shock you?”

You hesitated. But if you were being honest, yes, it did. You didn’t think Ed was the type to care for a creature so gentle and well-kept. But you know better than to say that outright. Instead, you shrugged, trying to play it off. “Didn’t know you had a horse here. Didn’t see your name anywhere.”

Ed’s lips curved in a bit into a smirk. “Name’s carved on the underside of the tack. No point in waving it in people’s faces.” He pauses, glancing at the nearly empty basket of fruit in your hand. “You feedin’ her scraps from the saloon?”

“They’re leftover fruit that wasn’t fit for customers,” you replied, holding the basket tighter to you. “Better it go to the horses than the trash.”

He regarded you silently for a moment, gaze going from your face to your hand to Nova’s stall. The horse finally recognized Ed’s presence and gave a small whicker of greeting, shifting on her hooves. Ed reached out and stroked Nova’s muzzle, and you can’t help but note the gentleness in his fingers. Despite his reputation, he treats the mare with care.

“You always come out here to feed ’em?” he asked, not looking at you.

“Now and then, when I have time.”

He nodded, not really asking beyond that. Then, without a second thought, he carefully opened the stall door and slipped inside. Nova huffs and nudges at him, sniffing for more treats. Ed reaches into his coat pocket, producing a small chunk of sugar. As the mare licks at it, he murmurs something under his breath to her. The sound of Ed's voice speaking so softly to a horse is almost foreign. You weren't used to hearing anything come out of his mouth that wasn't sardonic.

But you shook off your curiosity.

It isn't your business. You might've left it at that and walked out, letting him tend to his horse alone. After all, the stable isn't yours, you're just a guest. Yet the question rolls out of your mouth before you could stop it. "How'd you come by her?"

He glanced over, brow furrowing at your question. And for a second, you thought he might tell you off and it was none of your concern. But then he shrugs, bringing his attention back to Nova. "Rescued her from a rancher who wasn't treating her right. She was still young, but he ran her hard and worked her 'til she on her last legs. I took her as an exception."

By the way he clenched his jaw, you understood it clearly. Ed saw a horse being abused and decided he wouldn't stand for it. The old rancher probably wouldn't have known what hit him until Ed was leaving with the horse in tow.

Nova. The name suits her, you think.

"Well, she's a beauty. And sweet-tempered." You said, relaxing slightly.

He snorts a faint laugh, patting Nova's flank. "Sweet with some. She'll put a hoof through a man's ribs if she doesn't like him, though." A trace of pride warms his voice.

At with that, you chuckled. "Then I'm glad she decided to like me."

"You must be, She's got a mean kick." Ed leaned on the stall door, folding his arms, eyes flicking over your face. "Didn't figure you were the type to handle horses."

"Why not?"

He shrugs, but there's a hint of genuine curiosity behind his words. "I see you in the saloon, all refined and uptight. People like that often don't want to step in mud or smell like hay."

Your lips quirk in a smile you try to suppress. "I wasn't always in the saloon, you know."

"Is that right?"

You let a moment pass before you answer, drifting a step back so the conversation isn't quite so close. "I grew up on a small farm, but to be honest with you, it was more like a small patch of land. And we had a couple of animals like chickens, goats, and even a few horses. And I had a sneaking habit of being outside, so I learned to care for them since I could walk." You look at the nearly empty basket, recalling how you used to sneak lumps of sugar or handfuls of sweet grass to your father's mare as a kid.

Ed doesn't press any further but he exhaled in a long breath, pushing off from the stall door to run a hand along Nova's neck. "You say you feed leftover fruit to all the horses?"

“Yeah, it makes them happy. Saves it from wasting away in here. Some of the owners don’t have time to do more than pay the stable hand a couple of coins. I figured it’s only right they get a little extra care.”

He hummed, glancing around and noticing the other stalls. A few of the horses peek out, ears pricked toward the conversation. “Well,” he said finally, voice raspy as ever, “thanks for lookin’ after her.”

You raise your brow, uncertain you heard a note of gratitude in there. From Ed? You nearly doubted your ears. But it sounds suspiciously like gratitude.

“She seemed to like the pears,” you reply softly. “I’ll remember that if I have any more left.”

He hummed, and the air between you feels a bit awkward now, like neither of you knows where to steer the conversation. You sense he doesn’t want to be seen as friendly. It’s not his nature. But at the same time, he doesn’t seem about to wave you off.

A fresh gust of wind rattles the stable roof, sending a patter of dust cascading from the rafters. Outside, the crack of thunder grows louder. You take a cautious step toward the open stable door, peering out into the yard. The sky has deepened to a bruised purple, with streaks of lightning dancing at the horizon. You grimace. It was going to be a fierce one.

“I should head back,” you said, turning to gather your basket. “Storm’s rolling in quick.”

Ed pauses, looking at Nova, who shifts restlessly as if she senses the approaching weather. “You know your way around a horse,” he says abruptly. “You sure you want to walk back in that?”

You look over your shoulder, faint surprise lifting your features. Is he implying…?

“I’ll be fine,” you say, perhaps a bit too quickly. “It’s not far, just around the corner to the saloon’s side entrance. I can make it before the rain hits.”

He shrugs. “Suit yourself.”

But you notice how he keeps one hand on Nova’s side, a subtle sign he might have offered you a ride if you needed it. The notion that Ed, the brash, rude, and mean member of the Owl Gang, might do something considerate for you is jarring. It leaves you a little unbalanced. You pulled your attention elsewhere, trying to hide the tangle of thoughts in your head.

You clear your throat, bobbing your head in a polite farewell. “I’ll see you inside, I’m sure. Or… somewhere.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

As you turn to leave, the worn boards creak beneath your boots. And by the time you reached the stable’s wide entrance, a fat drop of rain splashed onto the back of your hand. Then another, then a dozen more. You hear the first roll of raindrops pattering across the roof, a rhythmic beat that makes the horses stir and snort.

Casting a glance over your shoulder, you catch sight of Ed closing the stall door, murmuring something to Nova before he lifts a saddle from a nearby rack. His posture is tense, like a man preparing for a slog in the storm. Possibly, he intends to ride out. The Gang is always on the move,

never content to sit idle, especially for someone like Ed, who prowls restlessly when in one place for too long.

Lightning flashes, illuminating the stable in stark contrast. You step into the yard outside, feeling the sudden weight of the rain begin in earnest. Your clothes caught some droplets that scattered across your body. You quicken your pace around the corner of the saloon. In mere seconds, the sky opens, unleashing a torrent. You duck your head, clutching the basket close, skirt edges already damp and heavy around your ankles.

You cut a line through the mud and puddles until you reach the side entrance, slipping in with a relieved breath. The echo of thunder booms behind you, making the wooden walls tremble. Inside, the saloon is relatively calm since it was still early evening, with only a small crowd. A few heads turn to see you, rain-soaked and slightly out of breath.

“You all right?” one of the barmaids asked.

You nod, offering a small smile. “Yes, just caught in the storm.”

You take a moment to set the basket aside, careful to wipe your hands on a towel so you don’t drip water everywhere. The saloon lights shake from the press of the sudden wind outside, but the lively hum of conversation continues undisturbed. Local farmers, a local merchant, and a trio of gamblers huddle around a table, shuffling cards.

Sighing, you shook off some excess water and straightened your posture, making a mental note to change into some dry garments soon. But for now, you have tables to tend to. Slipping into your usual routine, you check on a pair of weary travelers near the back, asking if they need anything else. One man rubs his eyes and politely waves you off. Another mumbles about wanting more coffee, but there’s none to be had at this hour, so you suggest a stiff drink to keep him awake instead.

Yet you can’t quite shake the encounter in the stable. The memory of Ed’s offer to help you get out of the storm lingers, if that’s what it was. Or maybe you’re just reading too much into it. But seeing him being gentle with Nova has challenged your judgment about him. You never thought of Ed as anything other than gruff and dangerous. That some measure of caring exists under all those rough edges, you’re not sure what to make of it.

You’re halfway to the bar when the saloon’s front door swings open, letting in a gust of rain-scented air. Heads swivel to see who comes in, and you feel your stomach tighten slightly when you recognize Ed. His hat brim dripped with water, his coat shoulders damp, but he wore that same cold expression he always had as he scanned the room. In one hand, he holds the lead rope of Nova, who’s clearly reluctant to come inside, though it’s not the first time a horse has stepped briefly into the saloon’s threshold on a stormy night. The stable hand must be absent or too busy to notice. In certain towns, folks do what they must to keep their animals from the worst of the weather, especially if the stable roof leaks or threatens to cave under fierce winds.

“Whoa, hey!” Mr. Rickshaw sputtered, halting mid-pour. “Not in here, Ed.”

Ed shrugged, steering the horse in a tight circle so as not to knock anything over. “Roof’s leaking like a sieve and she’s spooked. I’ll only keep her in a minute until I can figure something else out.”

Nova’s eyes were blown wide at the sights and smells, snorts, and hooves clopping on the wooden floor. Patrons scoot chairs aside, some muttering in annoyance at the sudden smell of hay and dirt.

You watch from a few steps away. The horse's agitation is clear with its ears pinned, tail swishing. Rain rolled off the side of her, and she shook her head, spraying droplets. Ed murmurs to her, voice low, trying to coax her to settle.

If the stable's roof was really that bad, it's no wonder Nova's restless. You glance at Mr. Rickshaw, who looks two seconds away from scolding Ed. Deciding to intervene before things escalate, you approach quietly, trying to be mindful of Nova's skittish movements.

"What about the shed near the back of the saloon?" you suggest, keeping your voice calm so as not to spook the horse further. "It's used for storage most of the time, but it's sturdy, and you can tie her under the overhang."

Ed turned his attention to you, and you could see a wave of relief wash over his face, though it was quickly replaced by his usual guarded look. "That's better than nothing."

Behind him, Mr. Rickshaw grumbled but didn't argue about the matter any further. Likely, relieved at any solution that gets a horse out of his saloon. Ed gives Nova's mane a final stroke and then carefully leads her around the tables, weaving through the parted crowd. You step ahead of him to show him the way, ignoring the startled stares or laughs of a few drunken patrons.

You slip back outside, back into the rain. Lightning lights up the sky with a spiderweb flash. You clutch your damp shawl tighter around your shoulders, turning to see Ed guiding Nova behind you. The horse is getting anxious, from the way its hooves slid in the mud ,and you place a hand on Nova's neck, murmuring soft words in a tone you hope is reassuring.

"This way," you say.

Making your way to the rickety old shed, you find it cramped with barrels, crates, and old furniture that the saloon's owner hasn't bothered to dispose of. But it has a sturdy roof, and a narrow overhang extends to the side, enough for a horse to stand underneath without being buffeted by wind or rain.

Ed takes a moment to tie Nova's lead to a post. The mare stomps, displeased by the storm raging around you both, but gradually calms as the downpour loses force under the overhang. You hover at a respectful distance, feeling the rain run in rivulets down your arms. Soon you'll be soaked to the bone, if you aren't already.

"You got any more of that fruit?" Ed asks unexpectedly, rubbing Nova's neck in slow circles.

You shake your head, wiping the droplets from your forehead. "Gave it all out earlier. Sorry."

He grunts in acknowledgment, then bends his head to inspect the tie, making sure it's secure. "It's fine. I'll see if we can get some oats brought over. She'll be all right once the thunder quits."

The horse exhales, and you think you see Nova's ears flick toward you, as though in recognition. Something about the animal's gaze draws you forward, slowly, until you're near enough to stroke that broad chestnut forehead. Nova breathes against your wrist, calmer now.

All the while, Ed watched you with an unreadable expression on his face. The wind picked up, and the overhang rattled. In the brief flare of lightning, you notice his narrowed eyes at the sky as raindrops slide down his face. This is a side of him you rarely saw, a protective, almost tender in his care, reserved for Nova.

“Thank you,” he says, almost startling you in that hush between thunderclaps.

You blink. “For what?”

“Tellin’ me about this place. I didn’t want to leave her in that stable if it was flooding. She hates being in storms like this.”

Your lips part, unsure what to say since you weren’t prepared to receive another helping of gratitude. Finally, you manage a “You’re welcome.”

He hesitated, like weighing his next words. “I, uh…I guess you should get back inside. You’ll catch a chill standing out here in the rain.”

You let out a soft huff of amusement, noticing how drenched you are from head to toe. “Bit late for that,” you tease, surprising yourself with the tender note in your voice. “But I’ll live. Been through worse nights.”

“Yeah,” he mutters, “haven’t we all.”

For a moment, you both stand there in the light as the storm lashes the empty yard behind the saloon. The rain’s steady roar fills the silence. Nova snorts, shifting from one hoof to the other, but less frantically than before. You tell yourself you should go—there’s no sense loitering. Yet a part of you is reluctant to break this fragile peace, so at odds with the usual tension you feel around Ed.

Eventually, you swallow, stepping back. “I’ll get the stable hand to bring some oats if you’d like.”

He gives a single nod, gaze lingering on you in a way that suggests a thousand unspoken thoughts. Then, turning his attention back to Nova, he says nothing more.

You take that as your cue. You draw your damp shawl closer, stepping out into the sheets of rain. The wind whips your skirt around your ankles, nearly making you lose your footing in the mud. You don’t look back, but you sense he’s watching you, at least for a few seconds, before the storm swallows up everything else.

By the time you reentered the saloon, your clothes uncomfortably clung to you, and your face was wet from the downpour.

“You’re a might too dedicated, goin’ out in that storm. That fella better appreciate it.” Mr. Rickshaw sighed.

You just give him a tight-lipped smile. But in truth, you don’t know if Ed truly appreciated it or not. He said thank you twice today, but with him, any kindness might vanish as quickly as it appeared. Still, you’re glad to have done it and glad that Nova is safe from the worst of the rain.

You go about your duties, ignoring curious glances from patrons. Eventually, Mr. Rickshaw rummages up some dry rags, and you excuse yourself to the back to change into a spare skirt and blouse you keep around for emergencies. Once out of the wet clothes, you take a moment to stand by the warm stove in the kitchen, letting the heat chase away the chill clinging to your bones.

Outside, the thunder rumbles on for another hour, though the rain eases. Now and then, your thoughts drift to the chestnut mare behind the saloon and the man who stands watch over her. You

wonder if Ed stays there all night or if he eventually brings Nova in once the stable is drier. Maybe Falke or another Owl Gang member will come by to keep him company.

But soon enough, you're pulled back into the saloon routine, refilling drinks, chatting with a pair of travelers about the route north. You slip into that role easily, the polished, poised saloon girl who knows how to keep a smile in place no matter how tired you feel.

Yet in the quiet corners of your mind, you replay the moment Nova took fruit from your hand. The soft blow of the horse's breath, the warmth of that velvet muzzle, the gratitude in those gentle eyes. You think of Ed, too, standing in the stable as thunder rattled the roof. The memory clings to you, an echo that refuses to fade.

When the storm finally passes and the saloon starts closing for the night, you glance out a window. The moon peeks through ragged clouds, illuminating puddles and a sky still tinged with darkness. A lantern bobs behind the saloon, possibly Ed's or the stable hand's, guiding Nova to a dry stall. Or maybe, if the stable isn't fully mended, he's found shelter in one of the vacant buildings. You can't be sure.

All you know is that for once, you glimpsed a side of Ed that was neither brash nor mean,just a man who cares for his horse, who recognizes an act of kindness when it's offered, and maybe has just enough manners to say thank you for it. It doesn't erase the tension you feel about him, but it places a small crack in your assumptions. Like a seed has been planted, quietly waiting to grow if given the chance.

That night, as you climb the creaky stairs to your small room above the saloon, you pause at the window that overlooks the back alley and stable area. Moonlight reveals a silent yard. The storm has passed, leaving behind the faint smell of wet earth. Your eyes search the darkness, but you see no sign of Nova or Ed, only the shape of the shed's overhang, the stable's silhouette, and water dripping from the eaves.

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